DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 799 HE 019 050

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TITLE The Master's Degree in Transition.
INSTITUTION Council of Graduate Schools in the U.S., Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Jan 86
NOTE 6p.
AVAILABLE FROM Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, One Dupont Circle, Suite 430, Washington, DC 20036-1173.
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Viewpoints (120)
JOURNAL CIT CGS Communicator; v19 n1 Jan 1986

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Planning; College Programs; Decentralization; Distance Education; *Educational Change; Education Work Relationship; Experiential Learning; External Degree Programs; *Graduate Study; Higher Education; Internship Programs; Interprofessional Relationship; *Masters Degrees; *Professional Education; *Specialization

ABSTRACT

Past and current features of the master's degree and planning implications are considered. After outlining the traditional master's degree, five recent trends are addressed: specialization, professionalization, application, decentralization, and depersonalization. The number of special master's degree programs has grown, and many programs lead to specialized entry-level positions in the professions or to supervisory careers. Almost no American profession lacks an appropriate master's degree program. There has also been increasing provision for applied experience through internships. While residency and mentorship has been deemphasized or discontinued, no new consensus about the structure of external degrees, or external coursework, has been developed. In addition to professional education, master's programs also provide traditional scholarly training for future university leaders, and avocational study for students whose goal is learning. Likely trends for the future include: the professionalization of the master's degree will continue; the delivery of master's programs to distant sites, especially by technological means, will probably accelerate; and the master's degree in traditional disciplines will require continuing re-examination and refinement. (SW)

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VOLUME XIX, NO. 1 JANUARY 1986

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The Master's Degree in Transition

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It is the genius of the American nation, Daniel Boorstin has suggested in a series of superb volumes, that Americans are, above all else, eminently practical people. They attack concrete problems with concrete solutions, constantly experimenting and adjusting, innovating and retrenching in almost total disregard for either the imperatives of tradition or the dictates of ideology. Even in the realm of education, from McGuffey's readers to the astonishing diversity of American higher education, the central quest of the American experience, Boorstin has made clear, has been to identify and adopt those things which work and to abandon or modify those which do not, whatever the philosophical or conceptual implications of that process.[1]

At no level of American education since World War II has that tinkerer's impulse proven more pervasive, or more salutary, than it has in the continuing redefinition of the once scorned and lowly Master's degree. In an almost total absence of centralized planning—in the absence, indeed, even of a genuine national debate about the issues involved—the Master's degree has evolved since 1945 into a major source of innovation in higher education, resembling only in its most mechanical aspects the dominant degree structure which had existed before.

Nor can there be any reasonable doubt that the new face of the Master's degree has responded effectively to the perceived needs of American society and an entire generation of students, for enrollments have exploded, especially since the 1950s. The statistics are impressive. Awards of Master's degrees have increased more than tenfold since the last years before World War II, a level of growth unmatched at any other level of education. More than half of all the earned Master's degrees presented in all of American history have been awarded since 1974, and in recent years nearly a fourth of all academic degrees presented in the United States have been at the Master's level.[2] And nontraditional students have benefited particularly from this expansion. In the most recent year for which statistics are available, more than half of all Master's degrees were earned by women, nearly twenty percent went to racial minorities, and a growing number, not yet precisely measured, went to older student preparing for midcareer changes or for reentry into the work force after an extended absence.[3]

The Traditional Master's Degree. Superficially, at least, the emergence of the modern Master's degree seems ironic, for through most of its history in the United States, the Master's endured what could most generously be described as a checkered reputation. Despite its distinguished ancestry—professors in thirteenth-century France were called Masters, while their counterparts at Bologna were called Doctors, with the two terms carrying essentially identical teaching responsibilities[4]—the Master's degree arrived on the North American continent as an empty token of minimal accomplishment, the academic equivalent of the Army's Good Conduct Medal. From its inception at Harvard College in 1643 until the first years after the American Civil War, in fact, those colleges which awarded the degree did so

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for any alumnus who paid a diploma fee and, as Richard D. Mandell has noted with little exaggeration, "stayed out of jail for three years or so."[5]

And even after universities defined the Master's as an earned degree, as they had at Harvard, Yale, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Michigan by 1877, the Master's failed to command significant prestige, for it remained an academic program without a clearly defined or universally appreciated mission. At its best, for those outside a small number of narrowly described professional disciplines, the Master's represented little more than a waystation on the road to the doctorate; at its worst, it became a consolation prize for those who could not compete successfully at the more advanced level. The Master's degree therefore constituted, for its many critics, the supreme triumph of academic inutility, an archaic and obsolete diploma which served a useful purpose only in the most limited circumstances and at the most marginal institutions.

Reformers through much of the twentieth century proposed a host of plausible responses; yet the conceptual diversity of those proposals revealed little more than the profound ambivalence of academic opinion about the degree. As late as 1963, the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States identified remediation of undergraduate deficiencies as one reasonable purpose of Master's training. Others suggested that the Master's be defined, somehow by consensus, as adequate preparation for teaching in two-year colleges and in the first two years of baccalaureate study. And still others, perhaps noticing the enormous intellectual gulf between remediation, on the one hand, and preparation for college teaching, on the other, suggested that the degree should be eliminated entirely.[6] The postulation of such diverse purposes for the Master's degree, however soberly considered, called to mind the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov's purported remark about home medical remedies: if there are a dozen advised cures for a disease, he is said to have concluded, it is likely that none of them works very well. Harvard University's Dean J. Peter Elder thus summarized the conventional wisdom within much of the academic community when he dismissed the Master's degree as being something like a streetwalker, one for every taste and pocketbook.[7]

The New Face of the Master's. Yet it was precisely because of the widespread criticism of the Master's degree that its reconceptualization in recent decades has proven so radical. Unburdened by the imperatives of any tradition to which the academic community was passionately attached and lacking any but the most elemental and mechanical guidelines for structuring the degree, those faculties and administrators responsible for designing Master's programs have enjoyed a measure of discretionary authority essentially unique in modern American education. Thus, as tidal changes have swept across American civilization since World War II, the academic community has proven willing, on a campus-by-campus and largely *ad hoc* basis, to adapt the Master's degree more readily than any other level of education. Those who have examined carefully the most perceptive analyses of the emerging postindustrial society, from Zbigniew Brzezinski's "technetronic era" to Alvin Toeffler's "third wave" to John Naisbitt's speculations about the "megatrends" of the late twentieth century, can identify at least five fundamental realities which already have been incorporated into Master's degree programs on more than an experimental basis.[8] They are specialization, professionalization, application, decentralization, and depersonalization. Each represents a subtle but profoundly significant departure from the traditional canons of academe.

Specialization and Professionalization. No aspect of the modern Master's degree has evoked greater controversy than has the continuing proliferation of degree programs and titles. Despite the advice of the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, which continues to urge institutions to cling to the original, generic "Master of Arts" and "Master of Science" titles, degrees have multiplied since World War II at an accelerating pace. By the mid-1980s, *Peterson's Annual Guides to Graduate Study* listed some six hundred distinct titles for Master's degrees, double the number even of the expansive 1960s.[9] Because the traditional, research-oriented disciplines continue to offer only the Master of Arts and Master of Science degrees, nearly all the titles listed in *Peterson's Guides* refer to programs leading to specialized entry-level positions in the professions or to supervisory careers.

At work in this process is not merely the unprecedented expansion of advanced knowledge in recent decades—a phenomenon which threatens to make the year 1945 an historical watershed as distinct as the first stirrings of the Renaissance—but also the extraordinary complexity of the contemporary world order, and the imperative for specialists to make that society function efficiently. Thus, for example, veterinarians have spun off Master's-level programs in preventive medicine and aviary medicine; professional educators have designed degrees in continuing education, professional development, and film education; administration experts have joined academics from other fields to produce distinctive degree programs for managers in such disparate organizations as the aviation industry, hospitals, churches, courts, scientific laboratories, and even coastal zone agencies; and those who focus on the peculiar problems of the city have created a diversity of professional programs addressing pollution control, transportation, urban architecture, urban systems engineering, and other, similar themes. From the Master of Building Construction to the Master of Dental Hygiene Education, almost no American profession lacks an appropriate Master's degree program.

Application. Still, the new focus on professional education did little to encourage the current integration of practical experience as a component of Master's-level training.[10] For nearly a century after Harvard created the modern law school using the case study method, as it did in 1878, professional education emphasized the capacity to "think like" a professional, rather than to "act like" one: new attorneys, to the consternation of generations of impatient clients, were more likely to be proficient in critiquing the theory of contracts than they were in designing unbreakable ones. Not until the broad acceptance of educational theorists such as Benjamin Bloom and the compelling logic of behaviorism—in its most general sense, the conviction that only observable behaviors are worthy of analysis—has the movement toward on-the-job experience become widespread. For some institutions, as

for Northeastern University, Drexel University, and California State University–Hayward, the cooperative education model has penetrated at the graduate level beyond the professional disciplines to such traditional departments as those of speech, history, and anthropology;[11] for other institutions, departmentally generated and supervised internships, "externships," and practica have effectively duplicated the cooperative education model without adopting its name.

But whatever format is employed, the trend toward applied experience represents a conceptual leap of enormous proportions in graduate education. It is no coincidence, for example, that the incorporation of internships in every corner of academe has coincided precisely with the rise of the nonthesis degree program: the two activities stand, in a sense, at the polar extremes of academic life. Furthermore, no matter how carefully institutions screen their internship placement procedures, and no matter how insistently they define internship credits as those earned for academic work *associated with but distinct from* on-the-job experience, the fact is that some measure of day to day supervision of academic training is now being delegated to nonacademic professionals, a practice virtually unprecedented in the history of graduate education.

Decentralization and Depersonalization. Residency within a community of scholars for an extended time constitutes the most ancient, and for centuries constituted the only, immutable requirement for advanced education. From the time of Confucius, when he and other itinerant scholars collected tuition from those students willing to wander with them across the plains of North China, to early modern Europe, the totality of advanced education involved little more than a formal mentor relationship with a distinguished scholar and the opportunity for informal interchange with other teachers and students. Much of that ideal persists today; yet the convergence of important forces in the late twentieth century has compromised those traditions of residency and mentorship in dozens of disciplines and in hundreds of locations.

If the universal insistence on residency and mentorship has evaporated, however, no new consensus about the structure of external degrees, or even external coursework, has yet developed. At certain institutions of distinction, as at Columbia University, Carnegie-Mellon University, and the University of San Francisco, "residency" even at the doctoral level can be satisfied during periods on campus ranging from an occasional weekend to a few weeks at a time. Some public universities offer external Master's degrees only at previously designated "residence centers," a curious restriction since the library and other facilities at such locations sometimes do not exceed those of the local high school or community college. The National Technological University, which combines the instructional resources of such member institutions as the Georgia Institute of Technology, the Illinois Institute of Technology, and many others, can now deliver an entire Master's degree curriculum in engineering through telecommunications delivery systems. And although they stand in contravention of strong existing recommendations against the practice from the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, some very strong universities, among them the University of Iowa, offer significant quantities of graduate work through old-fashioned correspondence courses.

Implications for Planning. At stake in the continuing redefinition of the Master's degree is nothing less than the meaning of graduate education. Integrating prospective academicians into "the life of the mind"—the aim of almost all graduate study prior to World War II—presupposes full-time, sustained examination of an academic discipline, unlimited access to mentors and research facilities, mastery of broad academic skills in research methodology and foreign languages, and an explicit expectation that the novitiate would produce new knowledge in the form of a monographic thesis. Implicit in the new face of the Master's degree is an entirely contradictory set of assumptions: that students should be encouraged, through evening and external programs, to consider graduate study as an adjunct to the other priorities in their lives; that they are expected to master specific, rather than general, techniques and bodies of knowledge; and that they are being trained to become, however tired the cliché, consumers, rather than producers, of scholarly research.

For those who seek simultaneously to protect traditional definitions of quality and to respond to the educational realities of contemporary society—a phenomenon which seems, anecdotally, quite common—these are difficult times. Yet those theorists and practitioners who address such issues cannot anticipate an early release from their dilemma. On the contrary, every indication is that existing trends will continue to aggravate the conflicts inherent between the traditional and the modern Master's degree.

The professionalization of the Master's degree will continue. Already the American Physical Therapy Association has served notice that the entry-level degree for their profession will become the Master's in 1990.[12] Within the accounting profession, the Master's already is required for those who sit for the Certified Public Accountancy Examination in Florida and Utah; a similar decision has been made but not yet implemented in Colorado; and lobbying pressure has grown intense in the key states of New York and California. Meanwhile, the House of Delegates of the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy has debated intermittently since 1977 a proposed requirement that the Doctor of Pharmacy degree be mandated as the entry level credential in that profession. (Despite its title, the Doctor of Pharmacy degree is essentially identical in format and rigor to professional Master's programs, and bears no resemblance whatever to the traditional doctorate.)

The delivery of Master's programs to distant sites, especially by technological means, will probably accelerate. There exists a massive body of literature, much of it quite persuasive, that advanced learning can occur through such media as videotape, videodisc, Instructional Television Fixed Service (an interactive closed circuit television system), and even two-way audio communication.[13] Widespread adaptation of these delivery systems at the Master's level will depend largely on the cost effectiveness of those technologies, as well as on the level of student satisfaction—a pair of concerns not yet fully dispelled. Yet the infrastructure for distance delivery is now almost complete, and the momentum toward implementation may prove irresistible.

Political decisions which could lead indirectly to that result already have been made. The Western Interstate

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Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), for example, has created a program, recently expanded to twelve Western states, whereby unique and high quality graduate programs have been designated as regional resources; students from within the WICHE region receive some modest preference in admissions decisions and a full waiver of nonresident tuition charges.[14] One apparent purpose of the WICHE Regional Graduate Program is to release member states from the burden of duplicating specialized degree programs within their own borders. Yet as the Master's degree continues to evolve as supplementary training for placebound professionals—the logic of all existing external degree programs in a host of disciplines—the imperative toward distance delivery of those designated programs will grow inevitably more acute; and because the WICHE program involves twelve states stretching across more than a million square miles, it is inconceivable that any institution will manage to deliver its offerings throughout the region except through advanced communications technologies.

The Master's degree in traditional disciplines will require continuing re-examination and refinement. Master's degree students in traditional academic disciplines today represent an extraordinarily diffuse population: prospective academicians on their road to the doctorate; primary and secondary school teachers who seek advanced work in a content area rather than in pedagogy; recent bachelor's degree recipients biding their time until the next round of Law School or Medical School selections; mature learners who seek structured graduate work for purely avocational reasons; and a diversity of others. In some disciplines, sadly, even that broadly defined clientele has proven inadequate; as early as 1982, for example, nearly a third of the nation's graduate programs in German Language and Literature (33 of 106 departments) enrolled five or fewer students, and several enrolled none at all.[15]

Perhaps in an effort to meet the needs of their new audiences, departments in the traditional disciplines at many universities have revised admissions standards, deleted foreign language competency examinations, and eliminated thesis requirements entirely, even in such literary disciplines as history, philosophy, and English literature. Others have moved toward interdisciplinary graduate work. One intriguing manifestation of this latter trend has been the creation of Liberal Studies degrees, a set of explicitly avocational programs offered to mature learners through evening, weekend and intensive summer courses.[16] Under the leadership of the Association of Graduate Liberal Studies Programs (whose charter members include Dartmouth College, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Oklahoma, and several others), the national trend toward such work, especially in the humanities, represents a startling departure from the historic definition of graduate study as being rooted in the methodologies and content of specific academic disciplines; yet the social and academic benefits of such programs are clearly apparent in the enthusiastic responses they have received.

Thus, the Master's degree reflects in the 1980s three utterly diverse functions: professional education in a bewildering array of disciplines, many of which did not exist a generation ago; traditional scholarly training for those who anticipate careers as the next generation of university leaders; and avocational study for those who seek the entirely laudable objective of advanced learning for its own sake. The essential task of leaders in graduate education is to communicate that diversity of purpose within their institutions, and to recognize that, for all the sound and fury surrounding the new Master's degree, the debate is hardly new. On the contrary, more than two millenia ago, Aristotle noted the same tensions within the intellectual community of ancient Greece. "No one knows the purposes of education," he noted in Book Eight of *The Politics*. "Should the useful in life, or the search for personal excellence, or the search for new and higher knowledge be the aim of education? All three opinions have been considered. . . ."[17] In the structure of academic life, it seems clear, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

NOTES:

1. On the matter of education specifically, see Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958), pp. 169-190, and *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 462-501.

2. American Council on Education, *American Universities and Colleges* (12th ed., New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1983), pp. 2073-2074, 8.

3. Jules B. LaPidus, "Trends in Enrollment, Student Qualities, and Costs: The Quality of Graduate Education," *Communicator*, XVIII (March-April, 1985), p. 3.

4. Hastings Rashadall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages* (2 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895), I, 21-22.

5. Richard D. Mandell, *The Professor Game* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), p. 22; American Council on Education, *Universities and Colleges*, p. 2074; Stephen H. Spurr, *Academic Degree Structures: Innovative Approaches: Principles of Reform in Degree Structures in the United States* (Berkeley: Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1970), pp. 9-15.

6. For a brief summary of these arguments, see Lewis B. Mayhew, *Reform in Graduate Education*, Southern Regional Education Board Research Monograph No. 18 (Atlanta: Southern Regional Education Board, 1972), pp. 79-84; Oliver C. Carmichael, *Graduate Education: A Critique and a Program* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1961).

7. Quoted in Mayhew, *Reform in Graduate Education*, p. 80.

8. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era* (New York: Viking Press, 1970); Alvin Toeffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970); John Naisbitt. *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* (New York: Warner Books, 1982).

9. Phyllis Marsteller, ed., *Peterson's Annual Guides to Graduate Study: Graduate and Professional Programs: An Overview* (1983 ed., Princeton, New Jersey: Peterson's Guides, 1983), pp. viii-xiii; Stephen H. Spurr, "Academic Degree Programs," in Lewis B. Mayhew, ed., *The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973), p. 321.

10. An excellent recent study of the tensions between traditional views of "education" as opposed to "training" is Suzanne W. Morse, *Employee Education Programs: Implications for Industry and Higher Education*, ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Research Report No. 7 (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1984), pp. 23-32.

11. Mary Ann Carroll, "Innovations in Education/Cooperative Education/Continuing Education," in Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, *Recent Developments in Graduate Programs: New Opportunities Through Versatility: Broadening the Mold* (Washington, D.C.: Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, 1983), pp. 29-34.

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12. American Physical Therapy Association, *A Decision for Change* (Alexandria, Virginia: American Physical Therapy Association, n.d.).

13. For a recent survey of the literature in this field, see Connie Dillon and E. Strohmeyer, *An Evaluation of a Telecommunication System* (Bozeman, Montana: Montana State University, 1983).

14. Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, *Fact Sheet on the Western Regional Graduate Program* (Boulder, Colorado: Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, 1985; Richard Jonsen, *Overcoming Barriers to Achieving Interinstitutional and Interstate Cooperation: The Case of WICHE's Regional Graduate Programs Activity* (Boulder, Colorado: Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, 1984).

15. Graduate Record Examinations Board and Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, *Directory of Graduate Programs: 1984-1985* (4 vols., Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Service, 1983), B, 78-82.

16. Association of Graduate Liberal Studies Programs, *Charter and By-Laws* (unpublished).

17. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book VIII, Chapter 2.